

## THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT ON ISLAMIZATION IN AFFECTING MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA

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# THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT ON ISLAMIZATION IN AFFECTING MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA

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I. INTRODUCTION

II. THE HISTORICAL ENCOUNTER OF ISLAM AND  
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III. CONCLUSION

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## I . INTRODUCTION

Malaysia achieved independence from British rule in 1957 and was fundamentally established on the values of a plural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. In the following decades, Islamization, under the active support of the Malay government, became stronger. This continues to challenge the unity and harmony between Muslims and other religious groups, within this plural society. From the 1970s, the resurgence of Islam emerged through the activity of government and non-government organisations in secular educational institutions. Anwar among Muslim scholars has a look at the phenomenon known as the Islamic movement among intellectual Malay.<sup>1</sup> Mutalib, on the other hand, focuses on Islamic revivalism permeating Malaysian politics, in particular the Islamization policies of the dominant ruling party, that play an important part in the lives of Muslim and non-Muslims.<sup>2</sup> Government policies and the Islamic movement from the 1980s had a negative impact on Muslim-Christian relations, in politics, economics, and education, especially exacerbating social conflicts between the two religious communities in

1 Anwar, Zainah, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah among the Students*(Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1987).

2 Mutalib, Hussin, *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State* (Singapore: Singapore University Press). For more discussion of 'Allah issue' in Malay Bible, See *The Economist*, 2010. "In God's Name? Malaysia's Burning Churches, 16 Jan 2010; Abas, A., 'AG: No Prosecution Will be Made In the Case of JAIS' 300 Bibles Seizure' 11 June 2014, New Strait Times, Available at: <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2015/09/ag-no-prosecution-will-be-made-case-jais%E2%80%99-300-bibles-seizure> (accessed 4 August 2016).

Malaysia. For example, from the 1980s up to recently, the government has refused to permit circulation of the *Alkitab* (Indonesian language Bible), as, under the Internal Security Act (ISA), it was said to be a threat to national interests and public order. The tension between Muslim-Christian groups in Malaysia, such as the controversial issues of conversion and the Islamic State, has been built up in the legal and social aspects. Therefore, the importance of interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians will be investigated and emphasised, in order to mutual respect and harmony among different religious groups. In conclusion, this paper will search for ways toward peaceful coexistence and take the role of the government into account, in order to promote mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims.

## II. THE HISTORICAL ENCOUNTER OF ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY IN MALAYSIA

According to Roxborough,<sup>3</sup> the earliest Christian encounter with Malay can be traced to Nestorian Christians and traders from Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. They formed religious communities at the ports of the Malay Peninsula over the centuries before the Portuguese invasion. Although their influence was insignificant in Malay society, one must assume that the royal courts tolerated

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3 Roxborough, John, *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992), 1-3.

foreign religion. However, this tolerance ended when Christians, alongside the Portuguese forces (1511), in acting on political and economic interests, trespassed on Malay culture and the Islamic community. On the one hand, in the process of converting the local community, Portuguese merchants, soldiers and administrators married local women; most of the converts were not Muslim, but Indian or Chinese. Muslims and the Portuguese were particular hostile to each other.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, in 1641 when the Protestant Dutch occupied Malacca, they expelled Catholic churches and resettled Dutch reformed churches. With the different attitude of the Portuguese, there was very little missionary activity among local people.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the Dutch were less concerned about religious matters than militant and economic interests, due to their competition with Portuguese and Catholics. Meanwhile, under British colonialism (1824–1957) Christian missions, including the Catholic Church, animated in the region such as Malay and Penang, in particular, becoming important areas of British authority and missionary activity. The London Missionary Society and other bodies with British support established Christian schools and churches throughout the peninsula.<sup>6</sup> It can be observed that, during successive period, Western invaders exploited Malay society, not only in the

4 Sundaraj Walters, Albert, *Knowing Our Neighbour: A Study of Islam for Christian in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Council of Churches of Malaysia, 2007), 164–65.

5 Basri, Ghazali, *Christian Mission and Islamic Dawah in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Nurin Enterprise, 1992), 11.

6 A. S., Walters, *Knowing Our Neighbour: A Study of Islam for Christians in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Council of churches of Malaysia, 2007), 168.

economic field but also in the field of religion. Christian missionaries, with the support of the Western administration, could mix safely with local people and directly or indirectly propagate Christian doctrine. Furthermore, the Pangkor Treaty of 1874, between the British administration and Malay authority, ended the Sultans' secular power and permitted the Sultans only to retain religious authority and custom. The Sultans, however, showed great zeal for Islamic propagation and attempted to maintain their legislative and executive authority among the Malays.<sup>7</sup>

As has been mentioned above, Islam and the sultans' status in Malay society were closely associated, not only with the theological aspect but also importantly with the political aspect, as Islam was so radically identified with the Malay way of life. For example, in order to strengthen unity among the Malays against the expansion of British rule, some sultans attempted to legislate Islamic law for their Muslim affairs as the primary law, endeavouring to unify Islamic bodies under state bureaucracy.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that the British administration apparently did not allow proselytising among Muslims. However, the Christian mission developed a number of schools and medical institutions throughout Malaysia, carrying out their active ministry, especially among the indigenous peoples in East Malaysia—such as the Sabah and Sarawak. Many mission bodies, engaged in working

7 Kamal, Hassan, M., "Malaysia," in Esposito, J. L. ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 35.

8 Funston, John, "Malaysia," in Fearly, Greg., and Hooker, Virginia, eds., *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).

among the Chinese and Indians, established a variety of Christian denominations and theological seminaries in Malay society.

With this active mission work and the support of Western Europe, the Christian population in Malaysia gradually grew, while the proportion of Malay Muslims showed a slower growth rate in until Malaysia became independent. In particular, the treaty of Pangkor in 1874 played a vital role in marking a new development in the Church in Malaysia. Many mission workers were required to act as chaplains among Malays and immigrants from China and India. Various religious bodies and churches raised funds for the building of churches, the hiring of clergymen and educational facilities. The government readily gave land to the Christian mission. It can be estimated that under a succession of European colonising bodies, the Christian mission, with the support of Western authorities, made endeavours to permeate Malay culture by various means. This development led, therefore, to a strong antipathy between Islam and Christianity in Malaysia. Malay Sufi leaders and scholars, thus, endeavoured to establish Islamic education institutions, such as *Madrasahs* (modern Islamic schools) and *Pondoks* (village religious schools), to strengthen Islamic identity and social heritage, as understood in Malaysia.<sup>9</sup>

In 1948, in every state in the Federation of Malaysia, an Islamic court system, under British rule, was established to deal

9 Hunt, Robert, *Islam in Southeast Asia: A study for Christians* (New York: GBGM Books, 1997); For more information of the treaty of Pangkor, see Northcott, M. S., "Two hundred years of Anglican Mission," In Hing, Hunt, R., Lee, K, and J., Roxborough, *Christianity in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications), 1992.

with Muslim marriage, divorce, religious regulations about prayers and fasting, *Zakat* (religious tax) as well as the religious affairs department.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, religious leaders and nationalists harnessed Islam for resistant purposes against the Western conquerors and the Christian religion. Many religious leaders among Muslims assumed an uncompromising position towards Christian missions within Malay society. For example, an Islamic reformist movement emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which criticised the social structure of traditional Malay society. Several new religious leaders studied modern Islamic teachings and values under the influence of Islamic revivalists in the Middle East—such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh.<sup>11</sup> When the Malay reformers returned to their homeland, they established modern Islamic schools (madrasahs in the Malay language) where they introduced modern methods and subjects to Malay students. Their curriculums differed completely from established Islamic educational institutions—the so-called *pondok*.<sup>12</sup> They took advantage of the new media of magazines and newspapers and had considerable influence in the social and political realm. In particular, reformists known as *Kaum Muda* (the Young Group) began to criticise British colonial policy and encouraged the Malay com-

10 M. T. Osman, "Islamization of the Malays: A Transformation of Culture," in Ibrahim, A., Siddique, S., and Hussain, Y (compiled), *Reading on Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985), 47.

11 Kamal, Hassan, M., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 35.

12 N. J., Funston, "The Politics of Islamic Reassertion: Malaysia," in Ibrahim, A., Siddique, S., and Hussain, Y (compiled), *Reading on Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985).

munity to rise from their socio-economic slumber. This led to the anti-colonial struggle of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>13</sup> However, traditionalists, known as *Kaum Tua* (the Old Group), resisted Islamic reformist endeavours and, at the same time, Malay nationalist opinion gained popularity, becoming a social force. Since the Second World War, Malay nationalism among conservative groups laid the foundation of the United Malay Nationalist Organisation (UMNO) in 1946. British colonialists recognised the Federation of Malaya in 1948 and the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, known as PMIP in 1951—which sprang from the idea of establishing an Islamic state in British Malaysia—later changed to Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). Finally, the British recognised the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, during the period of successive European colonisation, Christian missions became a threat to the Islamic community and stimulated an Islamic revival, which continues to the present day. From a political point of view, the Christian mission led to the strengthening of Islamic unity and a sense of nationality among the Malay elite and the Muslim community. For the Muslim community, Islam became a symbol of Malay resistance to colonialism and a symbol of solidarity. At the same time, Muslims regarded the Christian mission as a symbol of Western colonialism and economic exploitation. Thus, it can be estimated that the

13 W, Roff, “*Kaum Muda-kaum Tua*: Innovation and reaction amongst the Malays, 1900–41,” in Ibrahim, A., Siddique, S. and Hussain, Y. (compiled), *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia*(Singapore: ISEAS, 1985).

14 Nair, Shanti, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Christian mission, under European powers, had a negative influence on the mutual relationship between Muslims and Christians in Malay society.

## 1. Islamization in Contemporary Malaysia

### A. Islamization Under the Mahathir Administration, 1981 to 2003

The UMNO-government, under the prolonged leadership of Premier Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003), took a more active approach toward the Islamization process in all aspects of Malay life than the approach of the previous cabinet. Mahathir drew up a comprehensive and practical long-term project for the Muslim community to use Islamic principles as a foundation for problem solving, in all social aspects of life. The government aimed intentionally to inject Islamic values into the administration.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the government established Islamic banks and Islamic economic foundations, and expanded Islamic institutions throughout Malaysia.<sup>16</sup> As time went on, the Islamization process under government control became active in many aspects of Muslim life. Mahathir presented the Muslim community with further concrete Islamic programmes and new institutions within the government as follows: the reform of national education to incorporate Islamic perspectives and values, the institute of

15 Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*.

16 H., Mutalib, "Islamic Revivalism in ASEAN States: Political Implications," *Asian Survey*, vol.30, no.9 (1990): 877–91. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2644527> (Accessed 23 August 2016).

Islamic understanding (1992) regarding national education; the inculcation of Islamic values in the administration, the removal of glaringly unIslamic practices from the official ceremonies of government departments in light of the Islamic oriented government.<sup>17</sup> Although Muslims commanded an overwhelming majority of high positions in politics and the administration, the zeal of the government in fostering and concreting Islamic principle as the driving force of national development caused emotional conflict and antagonism between Muslims and other ethnic groups. Such incidents amongst multi-religious groups will be discussed in detail in the next chapters.

At the same time, the government had to respond positively or negatively to the demands of the *dakwah* (Islamic mission) movement of the opposition Islamic party (PAS) and the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) in the socio-political context. For example, the Mahathir cabinet, on the one hand, decided to embrace Anwar Ibrahim, the capable leader of ABIM, in order to accelerate their Islamic reform within the administration. Anwar Ibrahim's participation in the conduct of state affairs injected a fresh vigour to Mahathir's Islamic initiatives in many ways: in the following year, 1983, the Islamic bank and the International Islamic University were established as the fruit of Anwar's support. As a further result, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation was created in 1987 to present

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17 Kamal, Hassan M., *Towards actualizing Islamic Ethical and Educational Principles in Malaysian Society*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University, 1996).

a clear understanding of Islam to both Muslims and non-Muslims at the national level.<sup>18</sup> During this period of Islamization, the government had to take a defensive position against the demands of PAS, which insisted on the complete implementation of the establishment of an Islamic state in Malaysia and applying an Islamic law (*Shariah*) on the basis of *the Qur'an* and *the Sunnah* in all aspects of Malaysian life.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, Malay leaders emphasised the importance of Islamic religious knowledge as a vital subject at the public primary and secondary schools, by establishing independent religious schools. For example, from 1977 to 1995, the government helped to establish 39 religious secondary schools throughout the whole of Malaysia. In addition to this, the Independent Islamic Association endeavoured to found religious facilities. ABIM, for instance, opened its kindergartens in 1979 and continued to expand 409 preschools throughout the whole country by 1992. In the case of primary schools, ABIM first opened in 1989 and increased the number of the primary schools to eight branches all over Malaysia by 1995. It continues to establish higher educational facilities such as secondary schools and preuniversity colleges.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, although the government has joined in initi-

18 D. K., Mauzy, and R. S., Milne, "The Mahathir Administration in Malaysia: Discipline through Islam," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 56 no.4 (1983): 617-48. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2758595> (accessed 25 August 2016).

19 Mutalib, *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State?*

20 Q., Hong, "Islam in China and Malaysia," in Chung, H. K. and Kok-Kheng, Y., eds., *Malaysia, Southeast Asia and the Emerging China: Political, Economic and Cultural Perspectives*(Kuala Lumpur: Institute of China Studies, 2005), 68.

ating Islamic values and principles within Malay society and in addressing the economic–social imbalance among multi–ethnic groups, especially for Malay Muslims, the government, in fact, wished to avoid violent conflict between Muslims and other ethnic communities; instead, aiming to maintain peaceful social order within the plural society and to work together in harmony. Furthermore, the UMNO–government is sensitive to the cultural, political and religious life of the non–Malays who make up half of the population of Malaysia. In light of economic–political aspects, the Chinese are still a considerable national asset and the UMNO–government do not want to lose their electorate in competition with the opposition party, PAS, in the struggle for political power.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Malay government should take into consideration the position of non–Muslims and carry out an Islamic policy with cautious and systematic plans.

### B. Islamization as a Means of Winning Political Hegemony

In Malaysia, political teaching and Islamic principles, based on the *Qur'an*, always remind Muslims of the inseparable relationship between religion and politics, especially in both UMNO and PAS relations in post–independence Malaysia. Since the mid–1970s Malaysia has experienced progressive Islamic resurgence,

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21 D., Sofjan, and , E., Trojnar “The Challenge of Building a Multi–Ethnic State in Malaysia,” *Hemispheres* 26, *Scholarly Journals*, (2011):147–61,180. Wroclaw: Polish Academy of Science, Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures. Available at: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1030082600?accountid=8630> (accessed 25 August 2016).

such as political Islam, which is connected with political ideas and practices, culture and institutions.<sup>22</sup> In the midst of Islamic development, PAS is always centre-stage in Islamic politics and has made use of Islam in rural areas to win Muslims' confidence. This has drawn people away from the dominant ruling party, UMNO, which wants Malaysia—with the largely non-Muslim Chinese and Indian communities—to remain a secular state.<sup>23</sup> The diverse *dakwah* organisations, including ABIM, Darul Arqam and Jama'at Tabligh and other Islamic groups, have played an active role in strengthening the *dakwah* movement and propagating its values and practices in educational and social areas. Such passionate activities were a powerful force leading the government to adopt more Islamic policies at a national level. Since 1981, for example, the Mahathir administration has announced a series of Islamic policies for Muslims: the Islamic Economic Foundation, the Islamic Medical Centre, and the official declaration of Islamization of government machinery.<sup>24</sup> It may be thought that such government agreements were conscious of the views of Muslim leaders and political rivals, as a way of convincing the Malay-Muslim populace to promote Islam. With regard to the activities of Islamic NGOs and ABIM, the government at first questioned the

22 O., Bakar, "Malaysian Islam in the Twenty-First Century: The Promise of a Democratic Transformation?," in Esposito, John L., Voll, John O. and Bakar, Osman eds., *Asian Islam in the 21st Century*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

23 D. K., Mauzy, and R. S., Milne, "The Mahathir administration in Malaysia: Discipline through Islam," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 56, no.4(1983):617-48. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2758595> (accessed 25 August 2016).

24 Mutalib, "Islamic Revivalism in ASEAN States: Political Implications," 877-9.

non-government *dakwah* movement and realised that its activities were a challenge to the government policy of multi-racial unity. Moreover, it was clear that through the national education and culture policies the government made attempts to give various privileges to Bumiputra, both Muslims and indigenous people, to obtain their support in politics and to suppress their complaints about social and economic imbalance.

According to Anne Munro-Kua,<sup>25</sup> the state stressed the national culture policy in 1971: national culture must be based on the indigenous culture of the region. Islam is an important component of national culture. The policy was estimated not to include the interests of different ethnic groups and at the same time it provoked the displeasure of the non-Malay community. The *dakwah* movement was a political force implemented by the government or by Islamic NGOs, proving a great assistance to Islamic revivalism. As advocates of the Islamic vision for Malaysia, PAS, on the one hand, wished to benefit from the popularity of *dakwah* and endeavoured to seize a golden opportunity to centralise religious policy and its participation concerning the national Islamic bureaucracy in post-independent Malaysia.<sup>26</sup> It can be argued that PAS made use of Islam to gain the attention of Muslims in electoral politics, encouraging them to compete with the ruling

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25 Munro-Kua, Anne, *Authoritarian Populism in Malaysia* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1996).

26 S., Siddique, "Conceptualizing Contemporary Islam: Religion or ideology?," in Ibrahim, A., Siddique, S., and Hussain, Y (compiled), *Reading on Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985).

party, UMNO. On the other hand, UMNO made great efforts to maintain superiority in power over PAS, and, as guardians of Islam, UMNO wished to be recognised by the Malay community. They, therefore, devoted their energies to Islamization to seize Malay support against persistent challenge and slander by PAS.<sup>27</sup> In the aftermath of September 11, the cabinet of Mahathir sought to counter the increased misunderstanding and pressure coming from Muslim supporters in competition with PAS, by asserting that the government should recognise the establishment of the *hudud*—one of Islamic law—as an Islamic state, instead of conducting anti-Islamic policies. With regard to the statement of PAS, Mahathir claimed that Malaysia was an Islamic country founded on Islamic principles. In addition, although Malaysia does not agree with implementing the law of *hudud* in federal states, Malaysia is an Islamic country, which respects the specific rights of non-Muslims. This is compatible with the teachings of Islam.<sup>28</sup> As Esposito's insist (1997),<sup>29</sup> since the 1970s, the government has made use of Islam to reinforce its authority and political power, legitimising diverse policies and obtaining popular support. Islam, as a symbol of political legitimacy and a source of popular mobilisation, has played a crucial role in Muslim countries.

In conclusion, both UMNO and PAS focus more on Islamic re-  
vivalism than other groups in the context of Malay politics. In the

27 Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, 32–3.

28 Sofian and Trojnar, “The challenge of Building a Multi-Ethnic State in Malaysia,” 155.

29 J. L., Esposito, *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?*(London: Lynne Rienner, 1997).

21<sup>st</sup> Century, UMNO should avoid exploiting Islam to gain Malay-Muslims support in political power; as such a political gesture will alienate other ethnic groups from social solidarity. In order to gain much more support from both the Muslim community and non-Muslim citizens, UMNO therefore need a double political policy, to narrow the growing ethnic-religious gap and to meet the demand of multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups—including human rights, religious freedom, social justice and equal opportunity in politics. There is no doubt that Islam continues to play a significant role in Malaysian society. Nevertheless, it seems that both UMNO and PAS cannot maintain power without close co-operation with other ethnic groups in the demographic aspect. Therefore, a narrow ethnic-religious policy still remains an important task for the government to solve.

### C. Islamization as a Means of Social Integration in the 21st Century

Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi (2003–2009), in the post-Mahathir period, launched a new Islamic policy, known as ‘Islam *Hadhari*’, in which he aimed to distinguish his religious policy from his predecessor’s. Islam *Hadhari* (civilizational Islam) aimed not only to encourage Malay-Muslims to modernise social and economic realms, but also to guarantee a prosperous and harmonious nation and a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.<sup>30</sup>

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30 Fealy and Hooker, *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia*, 256.

From the political viewpoint, it is to be expected that Islam occupy a key position, as the most influential ideology and most trustworthy influence in Malay dominated politics, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Islam *Hadhari* aims to achieve the adoption of ten main principles, based on the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, that lays the foundation of civilizational Islam.<sup>31</sup>

Badawi believes that these principles will not lead to conflict among the different groups. On the contrary, however, some Malaysian leaders have questioned what the concept of Islam 20-*Hadhari* actually means, the message of the government having led to political issues among Malay Muslims. According to Hadi Awang,<sup>32</sup> the PAS president and former chief minister of Terengganu, the government has used Islam as a political means of manipulating people's religious faith. Awang argues that the term 'civilizational Islam' is in conflict with basic Islamic teachings. He criticises Islam *Hadhari*, saying that the government programme not only misunderstands and distorts true Islam but has also the purpose of gaining the support of non-Malays.

Nevertheless, Walters believes that Badawi's Islam *Hadhari* has made a better impression on non-Muslims than on Ma-

31 Ibid., 162. The ten principles in the Islam *Hadhari* in the official document are (1) faith and piety in Allah, (2) a just and trustworthy government, (3) a free and independent people, (4) mastery of knowledge, (5) balanced and comprehensive economic development, (6) a good quality of life, (7) protection of the rights of minority groups and women, (8) cultural and moral integrity, (9) safeguarding the environment, and (10) strong defenses; see *Government of Malaysia, The Concept of Islam Hadhari* (Kuala Lumpur, 2005).

32 A. Hadi., Awang, *Hadharah Islamiyyah Bukan Islam Hadhari* (Islamized civilization not civilizational Islam), (Kuala Lumpur: Nufair Street Sdn Bhd, 2005).

lay-Muslims and has provided an inclusive and acceptable policy for multi-cultural and multi-religious groups in Malaysia.<sup>33</sup> It creates a comfort zone for non-Muslims by protecting the rights of minority groups within Islam-oriented policies. Even though there are many different views on Islam *Hadhari* in a multi-racial country, it should be kept in mind that radical Islamic ideology, influenced by Syed Qutb and the Islamic state-oriented ulama, still exists in the complicated Malaysian political environment. Considering the plural society dimension, Bakar emphasises the importance of Islam *Hadhari*, for Abdullah's administration, for having shifted political issues from an Islamic state to his brand of civilizational Islam.<sup>34</sup> Islam *Hadhari* can therefore be regarded as a new Islamic policy to reduce the emphasis on the idea of a totally Islamic state, thus turning people back from both PAS's vision of an Islamic state and Mahathir's Islamic policy that dichotomises Malaysian society.

In summary, Islam *Hadhari* clearly shows that the inseparable relationship between religion and politics in Malaysia society, and also demonstrates a new way of coming to terms with the different viewpoints of multi-racial and multi-religious groups.

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33 A. S., Walters, *Knowing Our Neighbour: A Study of Islam for Christians in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Council of Churches of Malaysia, 2007), 238.

34 O., Bakar, "Malaysian Islam in the Twenty-First Century: The Promise of a Democratic Transformation?," In Esposito, John L., Voll, John O. and Bakar, Osman, eds., *Asian Islam in the 21st Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

## 2. Challenges and Issues of Islamization in Affecting Muslim-Christian Relations

### A. Conversion and Apostasy Among Muslims and Christians

In the multi-religious society of Malaysia, there is still heated controversy about the right to practice a religion, and the right to propagate it. The constitution of Malaysia (Article 11: 4) states that federal law may restrict or even forbid the propagation of any religious doctrine among persons professing the religion of Islam, but it does not state on the other hand that Muslims shall not spread Islam among non-Muslims.<sup>35</sup> Although Dr. Mahathir's cabinet emphasised equity, pluralism, and social integration, during the process of national development, since the 1980s this administration has continued to emphasise the role of Islam in Malaysia's economic, political and educational life and further conversion to Islam among non-Muslims.<sup>36</sup> According to Harding,<sup>37</sup> since 1980, under the cabinet of Dr. Mahathir, more

35 See Article 2(1) of the constitution, which states that every person has the right to profess and practice his religion, and subject to clause (4), to propagate it. In the Article 121(A) ensures a dual legal system for the country with civil and *Sharia* courts having separate jurisdictions. For more discussion of the relationship between religion and ethnicity in Malaysia, see Osman Bakar, "Islam and the Malay Civilizational Identity: Tension and Harmony between Ethnicity and Religiosity," in John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, eds., *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 480-87.

36 F. R., Von Der Mehden, "Malaysia: Islam and multi-ethnic polities." In Esposito, John L., ed, *Islam in Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987), 185.

37 Andrew, Harding, *The Constitution of Malaysia* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2012), 240.; For more detailed discussion of multi-religion society in Malaysia, see Mitsuo, N., Siddique, S and Bajunid, O. Farouk, *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2001).

than 100,000 Malaysians, who were mainly local people in Sabah and Sarawak, have converted to Islam, while those who converted to other religions, especially to Christianity, are said to be very small in number. About 750 Muslims, between 1999 and 2003, attempted to apply to the National Registration Department to renounce Islam and to change their names to non-Muslim names. Of the 750 applicants, only 100 people were allowed to apply to the Syariah court and in only one of the 13 states. It demonstrates that the government has officially permitted Muslims to propagate Islam among non-Muslims, but has forbidden people of other religions to propagate their message among Muslims. As seen above, the religious freedom of non-Muslims is being limited by the government and non-Muslims faces unfair treatment in the matter of the freedom of expression in Malaysia. Although the *Qur'an* says that there is no compulsion in religion (Surah 2: 256a), the government of Malaysia does not allow Muslims to convert to other religions. Concerning apostasy, among Muslim thinkers who support the death penalty for the apostate, the Pakistani religious scholar, Maududi claims that apostasy is not permissible within an Islamic state, because it disrupts the harmony and happiness of society, and spreads like plague.<sup>38</sup> Islamic scholars consider that apostates should be punished, with the authority of the *Qur'an*, because apostasy has disruptive social effects.

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38 For a detailed discussion of conversion in Islam, see Saeed, A. and Saeed, H., *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004).

By contrast, according to Hourani,<sup>39</sup> Rashid Rida, one of modern Muslim thinkers, has a different view on apostasy. He points out that there should be a distinction between an apostate who abandons Islam individually and one who rebels against Islam, because the latter could be a threat to the Muslim community (*Ummah*). According to Talbi (2006),<sup>40</sup> it must be remembered that the death penalty against the apostate is not clearly based on the text of the *Qur'an* and therefore can be abandoned. On the contrary, there are some texts of the *Qur'an* on prohibition of conversion by force (Surah 2: 256; 10:99–100).<sup>41</sup> There are some texts of the *Qur'an* for the apostate that warn and advise, but is no punishment on the problem of the apostates on earth. It can be concluded that anybody could not engage in the problem of religious liberty because it is a matter between God and the apostate's faith and it therefore is not our role to punish persons who abandon Islam.

Nevertheless, in many Muslim countries, traditional interpretations of Islam still restrict or ban one's freedom in many ways. The Muslim is not free to change their religion to Christianity or

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39 A., Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

40 M., Talbi, "Religious Liberty: A Muslim Perspective," In Kamrava, M., ed., *The New Voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity* (London and New York: I.B. TAURIS, 2006).

41 The *Qur'an* states that "there is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believers in God has grasped the firmest hand—hold, one that will never break, God is all hearing and all knowing" (Surah 2:257); "So can you (Prophet) compel people to believe? No soul can believe except by God's will" (Surah 10:99b–100) in the Quotation of *The Qur'an*, A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Buddhism and so on. A Muslim who abandons his religion, as an apostate, should be severely punished by Islamic law.<sup>42</sup> For example, in Malaysia, the case of Lina Joy illustrates this problem. She converted to Christianity and, in 1998, managed to change her Muslim name ‘Azalina Jailani’ to the Christian name, ‘Lina Joy’. In order to remove her Islamic designation from her Malaysian identity card, she made several applications to the National Registration Department, but was rejected on the spot. After that the *shariah* court officially declared her an apostate and refused her appeal to abandon Islam. Azalina Jailani took the decision of the *shariah* court to the High Court (2001) and Court of Appeal (2005). This was also cancelled by the judiciary, for the reason that the civil court had no jurisdiction over Islamic matters.<sup>43</sup> The Azalin Jailani case also become a heated issue among political parties. The Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) claimed that this case should depend on the decision of the *shariah* court and that the court should not regard her as an apostate because it would mean her execution, in the view of traditional interpretations of Islam. Azalin Jailani, between 2005 and 2007, finally brought her renouncement from Islam to the federal court and the case won attention throughout the national and international media. Many different views of the case of Azalin Jailani have been pre-

42 M., Kadivar, “Freedom of Religion and Relief in Islam,” In Kamrava, M., ed., *The new voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity* (London and New York: I,B,TAURIS, 2006).

43 T., Kortteinen, “Islamic Resurgence and The Ethnicization of The Malaysian State: The case of Lina Joy,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol.23, no.2 (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), 216–33.

sented. In the eyes of human rights activists, she has the right to change her religion to Christianity in a plural society, because Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) declares, “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”. Nevertheless, the Malaysian Federal Court made a decision to dismiss Azalin Jailani’s appeal, concluding that her abandonment of Islam and the legitimacy of her conversion depended upon the decision of the *shariah* court (Harding, 2012).<sup>44</sup> In the view of the Malaysian judicial system, Azalin Jailani, in the end, remains a Muslim. Moreover, the decision has created legal precedent concerning matters of apostasy in the jurisdiction of Malaysia.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps the only option for Muslims in Islamic countries, in pursuing their right to profess the religion of their choice, is to leave their own country.

In conclusion, the government of Malaysia has resolved matters on religious freedom of citizens in the view of Islamic law, but not on the basis of the constitution and human rights. The government needs to work with all schools of thought to find solutions on matters of conversion and apostasy within various and inclusive theological viewpoints, though the dominant theological view of Islam generally adopts exclusive attitude about apostasy to other religions. Religious freedom is of important right in a plural society. Human being could respond to God’s call or not, freely.

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44 Andrew, Harding, *The Constitution of Malaysia* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2012).

45 J. C., Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

In the religious views, the problem of salvation and faith is God's sovereignty and mystery of God for human beings. Ultimately, the debate on conversion or apostasy is a matter between God and the human being. Anyone or any authority cannot therefore interfere in it.

### B. An Islamic State or a Secular State?

A revival of Islam took place in Malaysia in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution of 1979. In particular, it is calculated that the *dakwah* movement, as mentioned in Chapter Three, played a crucial role in spreading Islamic principles in the fields of education and public life, aiming to distribute more social rights and material wealth to Malays who had felt alienated in a Westernised and material-oriented development, rather than to other ethnic groups.<sup>46</sup> During this period, it is to be noted that the consistent legal claim of the Islamic Party, PAS, concerning the establishment of an Islamic state, has fuelled tensions and led to divisions within the Muslim community itself. The claim gave rise to a legal argument about applying Islamic law to become common law for the whole of Malay society. For instance, working towards the establishment of an Islamic state in Kelantan from the end of the 1970s until today, PAS imposed some Islamic laws in the Terengganu state, between 1999 and 2004, regulating public service dress codes, public entertainments, the sale of alcohol, and gam-

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46 L., Abbott, *History and Culture of Malaysia: Government, Politics, Economy, People and Tradition, Tourism* (Abidjan: Sonit Education Academy, 2016).

bling. Furthermore, they attempted to adopt the *Hisbah* (Islamic ombudsman) Enactment 2000, in both Kelantan and Terengganu, and introduced ‘*hudud*’ (Islamic criminal law), which vigorously led to a controversial issue, not only between the Muslim community and other ethnic groups but also among political parties.<sup>47</sup> In particular, Sisters in Islam, under the leadership of Zainah Anwar, strongly opposed the discriminatory impact on women’s rights and claimed that the *hudud* enactments of Kelantan and Terengganu violated the spirit of natural justice and equity in Islam, and human rights principles on fundamental concepts of the constitution.<sup>48</sup> In the response to PAS’s legal claims, concerning the enforcement of *hudud* law, the federal government officially rejected the implementation of criminal law in both states, stating that this law could not be implemented because it was against the concept of a just government in a multi-ethnic country.<sup>49</sup> As a result, the government was deeply concerned about the relationship between Muslim Malays and non-Muslims. PAS’s *hudud* legislation is seen as a blatant attempt to gain Muslim support, the government’s objection concerning PAS’s demand being seen as a political opportunity to obtain backing from other ethnic groups in opposition to this cruel law.

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47 Mohammad, H., Kamali, *Punishment in Islamic law: An Enquiry into the Hudud Bill of Kelantan* (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Kajian Dasar, 1995).

48 R., Osman, *Hudud Law Discriminatory*, 14 October 2011, SIS Forum, Malaysia, Available at: <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/news.php?item,908,121> (accessed 17 August 2016).

49 J. C., Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 61.

On the other hand, in September 2001, there were dual and ambiguous statements from the same government on the matter connected with an Islamic state. Malaysia's prime minister at the time, Mahathir, stated publicly that Malaysia should be recognised as an Islamic state. It can be seen that Mahathir's pronouncement was an attempt to end a lengthy argument over a point of law concerning the status of Islam, especially between the government and PAS.<sup>50</sup> However, his address fuelled immediate controversy among liberal Muslims, non-Muslim groups and even the Islamic Party of Malaysia, PAS. In the years following independence, PAS has been fully committed to implementing Islamic values and laws as a comprehensive way of life, and to the struggle for the establishment of an Islamic state in Malaysia that seeks the will of the almighty, *Allah*. Their concept (*Tasawwur*) of an Islamic state bases its legislation not only on the laws of the *Qu'ran* and the *Sunnah*, but also consultation (*Shura*), which is one of the vital guiding principles in implementing the affairs of the state.<sup>51</sup> Many other groups have responded negatively to PAS's statement that any attempt to enforce Islamic law in a multi-ethnic society, such as the majority of the Malaysian population, would create severe issues and divisions. Lim Kit Siang,<sup>52</sup>

50 J. C., Liow, "Political Islam in Malaysia," In Liow, J. C., and Hosen, N., eds., *Islam in Southeast Asia* (Oxon: Routledge 2010).

51 G. Fealy, and V., Hooker, eds., *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).

52 L. K., Siang, *PAS Islamic State Blueprint*, 19/11/2003, Media Statement, dapmalaysia.org. Available at: <http://www.dapmalaysia.org/all-archive/English/2003/nov03/lks/lks2754.htm> (Access to 27 July 2016).

the DAP (Democratic Action Party) national chairman, strongly objected to the PAS Islamic State blueprint pronounced publicly by the PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang as follows. First, it was considered a breach of the 46-year social contract with multi-ethnic communities, entrenched in the 1957 Independence Constitution, the 1963 Malaysia Agreement and the 1970 Rukunegara (Malay for “National Principles”), Malaysia being a democratic, secular and multi religious country with Islam as the official religion—but is not an Islamic state. Secondly, that the federal constitution is the supreme law of Malaysia as set down in Article 4, and not the Islamic law, as suggested by the PAS Islamic State blueprint. It also breached the 1999 combination of political parties’ common manifesto “Towards a Just Malaysia”, aiming to restore justice, freedom, democracy and good governance with a clear commitment by all subscribing parties to uphold the fundamental principles of the Malaysian constitution.

In conclusion, it can be argued that an Islamic state is incompatible with the concept of democracy on the constitution. However, PAS continues to push democratic Malaysia into becoming an Islamic state. Nevertheless, some have argued that, on the one hand, Malaysia is not a secular state since the government and some states in federal Malaysia formulate Islamic policies and implement *dakwah* activities. These include the government management from building mosques and religious schools to disseminating Islamic values and teaching through public broadcasting

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channels with the support of the government.<sup>53</sup> PAS therefore has regarded Malaysia as an Islamic State, strengthening the position of Islam in Malaysian society. On the other hand, other ethnic communities, lawyers and even contemporary Muslim jurists, still maintain that Malaysia is not an Islamic State and that the constitution does not support basing governance upon the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. The Islamic criminal code (*hudud*) is not in practice anywhere in Malaysia.<sup>54</sup> In conclusion, Islamic law, such as *hudud*, still has the potential to violate Malaysia's constitutional liberties, including religious freedom and democratic principles, and to weaken the unity of the society.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, in the demographical dimension, it can be expected that the government will not totally accept the concept of an Islamic state for the unity and development of the multi-ethnic nation, but it is still possible for the government to appeal to religion to obtain the support of Muslim group.

### C. Interfaith Dialogue Between Muslims and Christians

Having considered the issues in the above chapters, religious harmony and peaceful coexistence are seen as essential to national development and unity in Malaysia. Government policies

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53 Liow, "Political Islam in Malaysia," 144.

54 C., Muzaffar, 2002. *Rights, Religion and Reform: Enhancing Human Dignity through Spiritual and Moral Transformation* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

55 The Malaysian Bar, *Malaysia's Unity, Freedom at Risk with Hudud Bill, Interfaith Group Warn*, 31May2016. Available at: [http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/legal/general\\_news/malysias\\_unity\\_freedoms\\_at\\_risk\\_with\\_hudud\\_bill\\_interfaith\\_group\\_warns.html](http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/legal/general_news/malysias_unity_freedoms_at_risk_with_hudud_bill_interfaith_group_warns.html) (accessed 27 July 2016).

have had significant effects, either positive or negative, on the relationship between Muslims and Christians.

After the 1969 race riots between Muslims and other ethnic communities in Malaysia, the government made some attempt to promote inter-religious reconciliation and to foster increased unity among the various races in Malaysia. As one of the measures, the government first formed the National Consultative Council (Majlis Perundingan Negara or MAPEN) in 1970 and proclaimed the national principles, known as “Rukunegara”, to create harmony among Malaysians. Although these principles include belief in God, loyalty to king and country, the upholding of the constitution and the rule of law, and good behaviour and morality, it is perceived that they do not deal with concrete issues and specific relations occurring between Muslims and other religious groups.<sup>56</sup> With regard to interfaith dialogue, civil society organisations and Islamic NGOs have actively challenged and debated the issues of the intensification of Islamic law, defending their rights against a number of Islamic policies implemented by the UMNO-led administration. In particular, the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) plays a crucial role in seeking to promote dialogue and co-operation among Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs, and in the understanding between these groups and Malaysia’s Muslim community.<sup>57</sup> Since the MCCBCHS was

56 V., Verma, *Malaysia: State and Civil Society in Transition* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2002), 36.

57 Walter, *Knowing Our Neighbour: A Study of Islam for Christians in Malaysia*, 203.

formed as the official guardian of non-Muslim rights in 1983, it has showed deep concern about the Islamization policies of the government and has presented a strong voice for non-Muslim interests in Malaysia through the printing, publication, and distribution of journals, periodicals and websites, as well as seminars and conferences. Dr. Hasan Ali, in 2012, alleged that some Christian missionaries actually tried to enter mosques to convert Muslims to Christianity. The MCCBCHST supported the statement by Christian leaders that Dr. Hasan's remarks incited anger in Muslims and created religious tensions, although there was no certain proof.<sup>58</sup> With regard to these conflicts of faith, the government in recent times began to adopt an attitude emphasising mutual respect and harmony among religious groups, through social consensus and interfaith dialogue. Nevertheless, although the government has attempted to settle frequent disputes between Muslims and Christians amicably, the government has to take a clearer position in articulating and defending the religious freedom of Christians on the basis of civil court, not shariah court jurisdiction. Since 2001, the MCCBCHS, with several other organisations, has made concerted efforts to open a channel for dialogue and negotiation with Muslim leaders across religious boundaries, proposing to form an Inter-Religious Council (IRC) to strengthen mutual understanding. Specially, MCCBCHS wants

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58 Harmony Malaysia, *MCCBCHST: DR. Hasan Ali's Statement Has Tendency to Incite and Create Religious Tensions*. 29 February 2012. Available at: <https://harmony-malaysia.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/mccbchst-dr-hasan-alis-statement-has-tendency-to-incite/> (accessed 19 August 2016).

Muslim leaders to meet and talk with the IRC on sensitive matters such as religious conversion, as matters relating to marriage and divorce, child custody and religious registration of children on a Malaysian Identity Card have to be negotiated with Islamic clerics. They believe that some existing systems have caused emotional suffering and religious conflict to family members of converts.<sup>59</sup> In 2005, a discussion for the formation of an Inter-Faith Commission of Malaysia (IFCM) was held in Bangi. Fifty religious groups, political parties, and civil society organisations attended the meeting. The meeting met with strong opposition from Muslim groups and some political leaders. The Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGO (ACCIN) claimed that non-Muslims do not have the right to encroach on the teachings and practices of Islam, and to transgress Islam and the *shariah*. ACCIN asserted that neither the MCCBCHS nor the bar council were eligible to form the body for interfaith dialogues.<sup>60</sup> It is clear that radical Muslims do not want to have interfaith dialogues and exchange programmes to promote greater understanding and respect and they want to restrict the freedom of Christians to practice their religion in a multi-faith society. Christians and other religious groups have questions about whether the Muslim community has practised the spirit of the social consensus as enshrined in the federal constitution.

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59 More detailed discussion of MCCBCHS, Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*.

60 The Sun Daily, 'No Need for Inter-Faith commission, Says ACCIN', on 22 February 2005. Available at: <http://www.thesundaily.my/node/179424> (accessed 21 August 2016).

Although Christians and other religious groups, including civil society organisations, have demanded the need for interfaith dialogue to promote mutual understanding among leaders of the various religions, their attempts have met with rejection by Muslim groups.

The conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially Christians, have continued in many ways. For example, the *Shariah* Criminal Code, passed in the PAS-controlled Kelantan state legislature in 1993, continues to cause conflict and tension among different ethnicities and religions, although the *Hudud* Enactment is presently stated to be applicable only to Muslims. With regard to this enactment, the Sabah Council of Churches (SCC) expresses the deep concerns and anxieties of the Christian community. The council declares that the *Shariah* Criminal Code is an attempt to infringe the human rights of Muslims and non-Muslims.

In recent times, many religious leaders and NGO groups want more interfaith dialogue to resolve controversial issues and the cause of the trouble between Muslims and Christians. Archbishop Julian Leow, the head of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, says that interfaith dialogues are wonderful platforms to understand each other's beliefs and cultures. Such endeavours are therefore crucial for national unity and harmony.<sup>61</sup> According to Osman Bakar,<sup>62</sup> the *Qur'an* recognises religious diversity and

61 Daily Express, 2014, 'Interfaith Dialogues Needed: Religious Leaders' 14 December 2014, Available at: [http://dailyexpress.com.my/news\\_cfm?NewsID=95064](http://dailyexpress.com.my/news_cfm?NewsID=95064) (accessed 21 August 2016).

62 O., Bakar, "Inter-civilizational dialogue: theory and practice in Islam," In Mitsuo,

pluralism in human society. The *Qur'an* says:

“People, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another” (Surah 49:13).

In conclusion, there are still difficult and controversial disputes for the two religious communities to take the next steps in theological and political dimension: the problems of mixed marriage, Christian Mission and Islam *Dakwah*, and the application of Islamic law to a Christian minority living in a Muslim world. In particular, it must be noted that still for Christian Mission is of central importance and for Islam *Dakwah* has first place. Nevertheless, what is most important is to have inter-religious dialogue, where Muslim leaders, as the majority religion, come together to consider worsening of race and religious relations and sensitive matters affecting the country. The government should actively engage in dialogues between Christians and Muslims and perceive the need for mutual cooperation and understanding in the controversial issues, ranging from theological problems to common problems at the social and national level.

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N., Siddique, S and Farouk, Bajunid, O., *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2001). See The *Qur'an*, A new translation by M.A.S, Abdel Hal-eem(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

### III. CONCLUSION

As discussed above, with regard to religious freedom and expression in multi-religious society, the government has to walk a middle path, respecting the fundamental rights of human beings, especially non-Muslims, whilst at the same time meeting the radical demands of Muslims under Islamization. The Malay-government should take into consideration the position of non-Muslims and carry out an Islamic policy with caution offering equal opportunity to all Malaysian citizens based on the constitutional law, applicable in their multi-religious society. There are still religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians concerning the controversial issues such as the freedom of the press and expression, and problems caused by conversion and apostasy. Such polemic matters cause suspicion, intolerance and hostility among Malaysians. The government therefore needs to play an important role, considering the religious freedom among other religious groups, and maintaining inter-ethnic harmony in Malaysia. At the same time, the government should make an effort to avoid bias, antagonism and hostile attitudes in their multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. They should seek to achieve the universal value of Islam and the fundamental rights of human beings based on the constitution of Malaysia rather than taking political advantage of Islam to gain the support of Muslims in competition with the opposition parties.

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At the same time, it must be noticed that the negative attitude of radical Muslims towards Christians may emerge as a major barrier to multi-ethnic harmony. Sensitive matters related to religion continue to break out between Muslims and Christians. Both groups do not yield an inch to each other in relation to their own fundamental doctrine because they believe that their own religion is an absolute truth. In the context of Malaysia, as an alternative of achieving peaceful relationship, both religious communities need to stop and reconsider propagating their ardent mission attitudes among those of different beliefs to narrow the religious conflict. The government should make a consistent effort in reaching social consensus and mutual agreement between Muslims and Christians by the interfaith dialogue and policies. In addition, it is therefore of the utmost importance that the government should work for justice and moderation within the bounds of constitutional law to protect the religious freedom of minority groups, especially Christians, as well as guaranteeing the religious rights for Muslims. As Christianity and Islam are the two largest religions, without dialogue and tolerance for each other between these two communities, there can be no peace. In the end, it is essential that the role of the government is decisive in maintaining social stability and religious freedom in the multi-faith society. This could be a way for peaceful coexistence in a plural society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though there is no clear answer to solve the long conflicts between Muslims and Christians.

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■ ABSTRACT

# The Role of Government on Islamization in Affecting Muslim-Christian Relations in Malaysia

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This paper aims to consider steps toward coexistence and increased understanding between Muslims and Christians in a multi-cultural society although conclusive solutions to unite the two communities is not possible. The content will cover the historical relationship and background of the conflict between the Muslim and Christian communities and recount the historical development and the characteristics of Islamization which was implemented under the supervision of the Malaysian government from the 1980s to the present. This paper will examine and analyze how Islamization has been harnessed for the purposes of the political parties, UMNO and the opposition party, PAS, as a means to a political Islam or social integration. Issues between Muslims and Christians and their respective opinions will be examined. Furthermore, the paper

discusses the attitude of the government towards the conflict. The conclusion comments on the role of the government in Islamization, controversial issues and its effect on the relationship between Muslims and Christians in the context of contemporary Malaysia.

This paper is an attempt to suggest better ways to those with different beliefs in understanding one another and to offer an analysis of the ways Islamic policies are being processed by Malaysian society.

**Keywords:** Islamic Policies, Islamic Law, Constitution, Muslim-Christian Relations, Religious Freedom, Peaceful Coexistence.